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Symposium: Women Dentists

THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE IN DENTAL EDUCATION: A FEMINIST'S CHALLENGE

David A. Nash*

I am going to engage in a polemic—a controversial disputation. I know that is what I am doing and I want you to know that I know. I will not speak to specific strategies or tactics to recruit, retain, and advance women in dental education. Rather, my comments will be more conceptual. My tone will strike passion, for I feel strongly about this issue. I may not be as substantive as either you or I would like, but I will be expressing my personally reflected views on this vitally important topic. My goal is two-fold: first, to express one dental educator's perspective on a problem in dental education, and secondly, to motivate other dental educators to pursue, in substantive and tangible ways, redressing that problem.

Being a Feminist

I am a feminist and am here today to challenge the feminine mystique in dental education. In 1963 Betty Friedan sparked a major revolution in our society with her publication of *The Feminine Mystique*.¹ A "mystique" is a complex of beliefs and/or attitudes around an idea having a meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intellect. Ms. Friedan argued in her book, to me persuasively, that mystical beliefs of the feminine have overwhelmed our society. The fem-



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inine mystique says the root of women's problems is that women envy men and try to be like men rather than accept their own nature, their femininity; which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. The book, as a disclosure of the real nature of femininity, became a vision for women in much the same way Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech became a vision for Afro-Americans. With Ms. Friedan's leadership, the movement was galvanized by the founding, in 1966, of the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW was established with a declared goal of moving to true equality for all women in America and an equal partnership of the sexes. The movement to liberate women in this country from the feminine mystique began. I am a feminist and a member of the National Organization for Women. Note that is not "of" but "for" women. I proudly wear my tee-

shirt that proclaims, "a man of quality is not threatened by women for equality."

To me, to be a feminist is to assert:

- Women and men are equal in value.
- Women and men are equal in dignity.
- Women and men are equal in respect.
- Women and men are equal in potential.
- Women and men are equal in rights.
- Women and men are equal in freedom.
- Women and men are equal in autonomy.
- Women and men ought to be equal in opportunity.
- Women and men ought to be equal in responsibility.
- Women and men ought to be equal in obligations.
- Women and men ought to be equal in power.

To be a feminist is to affirm that women, as men, should have an environment that facilitates the realization of their full potential as human beings.

To be a feminist is to believe that every political ideology, every social structure, every religious faith, every organizational configuration, every cultural assumption, every government bureaucracy, and all policies, practices, and procedures must support the notion of the radical equality of women and men, the full humanity of both sexes.

To be a feminist is to fully support and endorse the unique, influential, important, demanding, and essential role of women in society.

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To be a feminist is to actively engage oneself in tangible ways in helping women to be all they can be and all they want to be.

To be a feminist is to reject all sexism.

I am a feminist and I reject the feminine mystique in society, in dentistry, and in dental education.

What is the feminine mystique in our profession? The feminine mystique in dentistry and dental education is the belief that women are not now, cannot be, and should not be equal partners with men in the profession; that women in the profession are an interesting phenomenon, but are only incidental; that women are not essential to the maturing of the profession; that the important, influential, and valuable work of the profession is, and must be, accomplished by men. Women's role is secondary, supportive, and superfluous. Acceptance of these mystical notions, neither apparent to the senses nor real to the intellect, contributes to what is a major problem in dental education; a lack of appropriate numbers of women faculty to balance the male contributions in education and research, and a lack of adequate numbers of women faculty members to serve as role models for growing numbers of women student dentists.

The Value of the Androgynous

I believe that women and men are different, in fact, I know they are. I applaud the differences! Each sex has unique and essential qualities and strengths to offer to society and society's institutions. Dentistry and dental education require the balancing qualities of women if the profession is to be as strong as it can and should be.

Carol Gilligan, working with the late Lawrence Kohlberg at Harvard, has identified significant differences in the psychological and moral development of men and women. Gilligan's book, *In A Different Voice*², is a most insightful treatise on women, men, and the differences existing between them. Her research at Harvard, which is sup-

ported by other gender - focused research, points out the uniquenesses of the male and the female that must be joined in a complementary manner if the strength of the total human, and I will add human organizations or institutions, is to be attained.

While the male emphasis is on:

- Fairness
- Justice
- Isolation
- Right
- Self Expression
- Self
- Rights
- Separation
- Independence
- Competition

The female emphasis is on:

- Care
- Love
- Intimacy
- Good
- Self Sacrifice
- Others
- Responsibilities
- Attachment
- Inter-dependence
- Cooperation

Riane Eisler in her revisionist account of history, *The Chalice and the Blade*³, looked at the history of the human race through the prism of gender. She used the metaphor of the blade to symbolize the cutting, penetrating, and competitive character of the male and the chalice to represent the receptive and cooperative qualities of the female. Her study suggests that men are oriented toward forming hierarchical organizational arrangements based in power; while women are predisposed to organizing networks based on communication.

Blending the characteristics of the male and the female is understood as androgyny. Literally, "androgyny" is from the Greek for man, "andros" and for woman, "gyne." Androgyny is men and women existing side by side. In the androgynous person, feminine and masculine characteristics exist side by side in the same individual. Joyce Trebilcot argues in the *Jour-*

nal of Social Philosophy that men and women should attempt to develop personality traits and engage in activities traditionally assigned to the other sex; a single ideal for all.⁴ Androgyny, in so far as it advocates shared roles, is now the official public policy in a number of countries. Since 1968 the official policy of Sweden has been, "every individual regardless of sex, shall have the same practical opportunities, not only for education and employment, but also for his or her own financial support; as well as shared responsibility for child rearing and housework."⁵

An androgynous culture, an androgynous profession, and an androgynous college of dentistry, are ones in which the uniquenesses of the male and female are admired, cultivated, encouraged, supported, and affirmed. The resulting complementary is a synergism, with the whole being greater than the sum of the two parts. Those of us with successful marriages have no trouble understanding this concept, for we know that this institution is predicated on such a radical *equality*. Dentistry and dental education, in order to mature, need to become androgynous.

Women in Dentistry

In 1981, 19% of our total student dentist population of 22,000 were women. Today 35% of the population of 15,000 student dentists are females. Nationally our current first year class is 38% women, an increase from 21% just ten years ago. Today in our College of Dentistry at the University of Kentucky, if we were to exchange five males for five females, we would have more women enrolled than men.

In 1982, 825 of our nation's dental graduates were women. In 1991, 1,304 will be, an increase of almost 40% in less than ten years. This year the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry will graduate more women in its class than men. Although there is no complete data base with which to confirm it, it may be the first time such has occurred in the history of dental

education. Interestingly, only one of our top ten graduates academically is a male, and all inductees into Omicron Kappa Upsilon, the national honor society of dentistry, are women. What have we altered in our College to accommodate to these dramatic changes? The answer is nothing.

In contrast to these statistics on our student bodies, only 857 of all 5,000 full-time faculty, or 17% are women. Only 15% (1,078) of all part-time faculty (6,904 individuals) are women. Thus we have 35% female students and 15% female faculty.

These figures do not comport with the ideal, a balancing of men and women. While we are rapidly moving to an ideal balance of male and female students, ratios among faculty are lagging far behind. Possibly we are only observing a delayed response that is due to women gaining credentials to enter academics, and possibly we will catch up. I am not optimistic.

Teresa Dolan, in a recent issue of the *Chronicle of the American Association of Women Dentists*, reported on a survey conducted in 1989 of the membership of that organization. The survey addressed the most serious problems or important issues facing women dentists today. The most consistent themes, "focused on the lack of role models; female leadership in organized dentistry; and poor visibility."⁶

The metaphor of the "glass ceiling" has been widely utilized to communicate the idea that while advancement to upper administrative echelons in organizations appears unobstructed to women there are really invisible barriers. Eric Solomon reported last year in the *Journal of Dental Education* that 8 of 117 deans and 20 of 281 department chairs in our colleges of dentistry were women. He said, "data show that movement of female faculty into administrative positions is quite slow."⁷ The "glass ceiling" appears to exist in academic dentistry. Yet evidence suggests that women excel over men in certain

leadership qualities. In the current issue of *National Forum*, the journal of Phi Kappa Phi, Carolyn Desjardins reports her research regarding gender difference in leadership.⁸ She found that:

Women Excelled In:

- Presence
- Optimism
- Initiative
- Decisiveness
- Persuasiveness
- Interest in Developing People

Men Excelled In:

- Self Esteem
- Self Confidence
- Self Control
- Challenge
- Openness to Change

I want to be sure I am not misunderstood. I am not an altruistic reformer, virtuously proclaiming the merits of women's rights and women's liberation. A reformer, yes; altruistic and virtuous, no. I believe gender roles are destructive for men. We men have paid a high price for the "control" and "power" we have traditionally exercised over women. I am a feminist because I believe that the feminist movement's efforts to transform women into autonomous, responsible decision makers is ultimately beneficial for men; for me. Such will make male liberation possible. Rollo May states it directly in his recent book, *The Cry for Myth*, "no man can withhold liberation from women without losing it himself."⁹ Men should insist that women make the transition to become "total persons." If women do not become complete in their potential, their feminine humanity, men cannot become complete in their male humanity. We men can become "total persons" only if we are freed from the constraints imposed on both sexes by traditional gender roles.

The lack of an appropriate number, 50%, of women on dental faculties today is a problem. Inadequate numbers of women in leadership roles in our colleges is a problem. Failure to acknowledge

the imperative of a balancing of men and women - failure to acknowledge the valuable role of women in leadership; and failure to affirm those ideals, are part of the feminine mystique. I reject and encourage you to reject this mystique!

However, I believe that a significant number of faculty members and leaders in dental education subscribe to the feminine mystique and are not committed to an androgynous culture in dental education. I hope I am wrong, but my observations lead me to conclude that the feminine mystique is alive and well in the clinics and classrooms of our colleges.

Taking Affirmative Action

Affirming an androgynous college leads to a commitment to leveling the playing field for women; to an intense and passionate interest and concern for recruiting, retaining, and advancing women in dental education; and to taking affirmative action as an equal opportunity employer. We are members of universities that are "equal opportunity employers." Federal law supports and upholds the ideal of sexual equality. However, there is a gap between our rhetoric and our reality, if we have the courage to take an unvarnished look!

As I stated earlier, I believe in the equality of the sexes. The formal principle of equality, attributed to Aristotle, is equals must be treated as equals, while unequals must be treated unequally in proportion to their differences. But, what constitutes equality or inequality in treatment? The usual way of answering this question is to say that the differences between individuals must be relevant to the issue in question. Men and women are entitled to the same treatment when there are no differences between them relative to the matter in question, in our instance, being a dentist or a dental educator.

The logical extension of Aristotle's principle of equality is found in John Rawls' influential book, *A Theory of Justice*¹⁰. What is just

today with regard to the sexes, considering the systematic inequalities perpetrated against women for generations, yes, even centuries? Rawls explicated his concept of distributive justice by arguing that social and economic inequities are to be arranged so that they are both reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all. What does "justice as fairness," to use Rawls' terms, require today in order to create a level playing field for women?

Kids have a keen sense of justice. Remember as a child when you would choose up sides for a game? You naturally compensated for age, size, and ability to be sure that the game would be fair . . . and fun! I remember the basketball teams for which I was chosen always had an extra player to compensate for me.

Today we are attempting to address "justice as fairness" in treating women by compensating for the wrongs of the past. We call our attempts affirmative action. As a society we say we will take action affirming the role and the value of women (and minorities) by actively searching for women, identifying women, and giving preferential treatment to women in hiring decisions; all in an attempt to redress the systemic, indigenous, and insidious inequalities that have and continue to exist in our culture and its institutions.

I strongly believe that to resolve the problem I have identified, inadequate numbers of women faculty members and administrators to balance our male-oriented approaches, and to serve as effective role models for our female students; that we must take aggressive and affirmative action! While our universities publicly proclaim their allegiance to the concept, all too often in academic dentistry I see and hear the "good ole boys network" beating its tribal tom-toms. Not only because of our sheer numbers, but also because of our communication networks, we men call

men to identify other men for positions which become available.

Not infrequently we men subtly deceive ourselves into believing that the male applicant is the more qualified, for any number of reasons, for the position that is available. It is not always true that opposites attract; in most instances in hiring, we gravitate to sameness. This is not affirmative action. This is not fairness. This is a continuing manifestation of the feminine mystique afflicting dental education. To the extent we are unable to destroy this mystique, replacing it with a reasonable androgyny, to that extent we will be unable to create a culture that recruits, retains, and advances women. Recruiting, retaining, and advancing women is the result of a culture that values the unique and essential role of women. Absent such a valuing and commitment, all programs, policies, and procedures will be hollow.

Conclusion

What must be done? Generally three things:

1. We must alter the assumptions and values of faculty, primarily men; however, I must acknowledge that I have observed women faculty seduced by the feminine mystique as well.
2. We must treat women preferentially, out of a sense of fair play, leveling the playing field; a choosing up of sides so the game will be fair.
3. We must select, appoint, elect, or establish leaders in dental education (men and women) who, in their attitudes and by their deeds, testify to their enthusiastic and unequivocal support of women in dentistry and dental education.

Such is not an easy task and significant change is unlikely to occur without a mild revolution. Power is only reluctantly relinquished.

I would challenge men today who are self-assured in their masculinity and comfortable and confident in their performance, the truly androgynous man; to join hands with our female colleagues in refusing, as did Rosa Parks, to "go to the back of the bus" to catch a glimpse of an academic community in dentistry where "justice overflows like water." Only when women are acknowledged, affirmed, and valued for the contribution that they, and only they can make in dentistry and dental education, then, and only then, will the feminine mystique be destroyed and men and women be able to join hands and hearts in proclaiming the strength, beauty, and potential of our chosen profession. Δ

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